

Wild Caught
Scott Norris Oral History
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Interviewer: MB – Matthew Barr
Transcriber: NCC

Matthew Barr: Scott, you grew up here.

Scott Norris: Yes, Sir.

MB: So, what was it like for you growing up in this town?

SN: It was pretty interesting growing up as a kid in this town. I got to do a lot of fishing and shrimping and stuff on the local boats with my uncles and some of my friends. I used to work with Buddy, [inaudible] boy, on the boat and had a lot of fun at it, growing up as a kid. I chose that as a way of life. It's been a pretty tough life at it. But I'm paying the bills [laughter], hanging in there.

MB: So, how long have you been a fisherman?

SN: I started fishing for myself about ten years ago. I was doing it for a living for our family about ten years ago. Before I started fishing, to buy my school clothes, to help Mom and Dad out with school clothes money and stuff like that, at the age of about fourteen.

MB: How old are you now?

SN: I'm twenty-nine.

MB: Oh. So, you've got fifteen years' experience already.

SN: Oh, yes.

MB: I was interviewing Johnny Wayne Midgett, and he started like you.

SN: Oh, yes.

MB: I'm sure you grew up with him. He was talking about how Julian, his father —

SN: Yes.

MB: His granddad died in the river saving Julian. Yes. Obviously, it's got some risk to the —

SN: Oh, yes. The river — working as a commercial fisherman has got a lot of risk. It's like you were talking earlier with Scott. It's more dangerous than being a miner or a doctor or lawyer or anything like that. There's the risk that just one wrong move, and you go overboard. Your boat gets away from you. You can't get back to your boat. You're gone. Like with mining, one wrong move, you fall down. You break your leg or an arm. Commercial fisherman, this is a tough way of life and a lot — you've got a lot of people that don't understand that, like the federal government. They all think commercial fisherman has got an easy life. They got it made. We don't.

MB: Do you think the public has a lot of misconceptions about fishermen, commercial

fishermen? Do they have these ideas that –

SN: Oh, yes. Yes, there's a lot of misconception on the commercial fisherman by the public. Like you were talking earlier with the seafood industry, there's a lot of imported seafood here that makes a lot of people sick. It gets blamed on the commercial fisherman, the local commercial fisherman. Every time somebody gets sick off of seafood, it's turned back to the local seafood industry. Me, myself, I've eaten raw oysters, raw clams. I've never eaten raw fish [laughter]. But I have eaten raw oysters and raw clams out of this river and from other rivers here on the East Coast all my life. I've never gotten sick. Never. I've never known none of my family to get sick from it. But it always gets turned back to the local people, to the local fishermen.

MB: Yes. I think the public don't understand it, but they think that the fish are all being overfished, all that kind of stuff. I don't think they even know how many fish are out there, but they –

SN: No. They don't got a clue what's out there. They think they do, but they don't.

MB: So, what is it about it that keeps you going to the water? There must be something. It's not the money necessarily.

SN: No, it's not the money. It's the – to me, it's the freedom of not having somebody breathing down your neck twenty-four hours a day like a boss man telling you when to go and what you can do and how to do it. Most of all, it's being with your friends, being out there with your friends, clamming, oystering, or fishing, talking and this – I enjoy myself as a commercial fisherman.

MB: Well, so there's a freedom. There's a sense of freedom out there that you can't get on the hill, as they say.

SN: Oh, yes. Being out on the water, to me, is like – I don't know. It's hard to explain. It's just being out there with your friends and family and – it just – that's something to me. I tried to move away from it. I went to Virginia with my sister, stayed up there for a couple of months, working at a public job. I was making good money out there, but I just – it wasn't home. To me, the river out there is my home, being here on the land and with all my buddies and my friends and my family.

MB: You can't buy that.

SN: No. You sure can't.

MB: So, in other words, growing up in this town you grew up with a set of friends who you're still tight with.

SN: Oh, yes. Part of my friends have moved away. But there's a lot of them still here that I've grown up with, just being there for me, and I've been there for them. It's things like that that's

tough to get away from. Well, it's impossible to get away from it if you've done it all your life and your parents have done it all their life, growing up teaching you their way of life.

MB: So, there's a whole generational thing here in terms of –

SN: Oh, yeah.

MB: The father, the son, and –

SN: Yes. Of course, Dad, he doesn't do it no more. He's into his – he does a little bit of carpentry work and painting and stuff for the local community around here. He does pretty good at that, which I'm glad to say he got out of it. Because this – being a commercial fisherman, you get to the age of my Daddy and my Uncle John and my Uncle [inaudible], it's tough for the older commercial fisherman now. Because there's so much more work involved in fishing now because of the federal government, because of the laws and the stipulations that they put on us. You have to do so much more to make a living at it now than what you used to do.

MB:

So, in other words, the federal government and probably the state too – I've interviewed Rich Carpenter who's in the Marine Fisheries down Wilmington. They're always stopping – I mean, there's a lot of rules you got. I have a copy of the rule book, this little green book. You have to be a lawyer to understand this, that, and the other about what we have to do in terms of obeying all these rules and regulations, right?

SN: [affirmative] The local fishermen has got a committee of about – I don't know, there's probably ten men on the committee, telling us or trying to tell us when we can fish, when we can't fish, what we can catch, how big a fish we can catch. It's just – you've got ten people telling you, you can't do something that the good Lord put here for you to do. It's wrong, that the state and the federal government, they need to lay off the little man and get on to the big man a little bit, that they're hurting the commercial fishing industry in the United States bad.

MB: Okay. Well you know what, I've often thought that fishermen and farmers, there's some similarities. Look at this little farmer.

SN: Oh, yes.

MB: What's happened to the small farm – how can the family farmer keep going against some giant place with 200,000 acres and trucks. In other words, it's like for that matter, there's a lot of small businesspeople, whether you have a little hardware store, or how about a bookstore? You can't compete against Barnes and Noble. Those huge operations, they come in there. They undersell you. Then before you know it, you're out of business.

SN: Yes.

MB: So, it seems like it's happening to all kinds of people. What do you think is going to be the future of fishing, commercial fishermen in this country? How's it looking like to you?

SN: To me, if they cut down on all their lawmaking and let things go as it is, we would be all right. But they're not going to leave us alone. The future of commercial fishing is about gone. By the time I'm old enough to retire from – well, I won't retire, but by the time I'm old enough to – that I can just give it up, there won't be no more commercial fishing, I don't think.

MB: Now, do you have children?

SN: Yes, sir. I've got two.

MB: Tell me about your kids.

SN: My little girl, Ashley, she's twelve years old; and my little boy, Randolph, he's seven. My little girl, she's a straight A student. She gets on the honor roll just about every six weeks of school. My little boy, he's having a little bit of tough time in school, but I'm – we're working with him, trying to keep him straight. Because I don't want neither one of my kids growing up as a commercial fisherman. It's a tough life. It's a hard life. If I can just see getting them through school and getting them through college, getting them out on their own, doing something good for themselves that's going to make them something, I'll be a happy man.

MB: So, you're saying that you don't want your son to be a fisherman?

SN: No, sir, I sure don't. I'm twenty-nine years old. I love commercial fishing, but it has really taken a toll on my body. I'm twenty-nine pushing fifty [laughter]. At the age of twenty-five, I had to have major back surgery because of being a commercial fisherman. The strain of lifting heavy things and all that messed my back up. My brother just lying there on the bed asleep, right now he's got back problems. Uncle Charles, he has got back problems. He's had surgery from commercial fishing. My oldest brother, the one we just lost in December, he had back surgery twice due to commercial fishing. So, commercial fishing is a hard life.

MB: I don't think people realize that though. They just take it for granted.

SN: No. A lot of people don't realize it. They just – they think commercial fishermen got it so easy because they can come and go as they please. They just – they don't understand. If they was out there on the boat with us, seeing how hard it was, how hard of a life it is, and how hard of a life it can be, then they might want to understand.

MB: We'll talk a little bit about your brother, Hotdog. Maybe start with some memories of growing up with him, like I asked your sister.

SN: I had a real good life with my brother. We'd go to school. When we get home from school, when it was warm enough for us to do clamming and stuff, we'd go clamming together after school and make our school money and make our school clothes money to help out with Mom and Dad, so it won't be so hard on my Dad. We'd go swimming. We go – we've just done a lot of stuff together growing up as brothers that brothers are supposed to do. You take a lot of families, the brothers, like your big rich families, the brothers are all the time fighting. I reckon

growing up in a small fishing village, a community, real small community like Sneads Ferry, family and friends has this thing that they just stick together. They've got to stick together if they're going to make it.

MB: It's one thing though, like [inaudible] with people such as yourself and other people, that if you don't go out, there's no money coming in. There's no paycheck, whether you're sick, if you're –

SN: That's right [laughter]. If you're sick and you have to stay at home, then there's no money. Like if the weather's bad and you can't get out to go fishing because of the weather, there's no money. It's not like sitting in office watching it rain out the window, punching the computer keyboard, and you get paid at the end of the week. If you don't go to work, take fish or shrimp or clams or oyster to the fish house, there's no paycheck at the end of the week.

MB: You're also subject to whatever prices happen to be going. So, it's almost not good if you're doing too good, right?

SN: Yes.

MB: You catch too much, then the price goes down.

SN: Yeah. There's a lot of that going on. Really know, you don't get to catch too much for the price to drop anymore because of the simple fact that all the importing things going on.

MB: Well, in terms of the actual, let's say, December 17th, can you take us through what that was like for you and how you first heard about what happened at all?

SN: Well, they went out, December 17th. That was on a Sunday evening. We didn't – I didn't even know he was gone. I never knew that my brother had left the dock with his friend Joey. Until the next evening, until Monday evening at about 4:00 p.m., I guess it was, me and my little brother, we've been up the river, oystering. We oystered all day long. We were coming back down. We got right there at the bridge, and Joey's Daddy and Donnie Millis was in my uncle's boat. They come to us and ask us, have we seen them? I said – we said no, but there was a boat upriver that kind of looked like Joey's. But it was another man that was clamming. We just went on to the dock, got our oysters out, took them to the fish house, and sold them. My little cousin stopped us on the road. Paul (Huey's?) youngest boy, Jason, stopped us on the road, and he told us that they had just found Joey floating, that he was dead. So, I think that's when it started on me then, that's when it got tough. The three days of being up there with my friends and family searching for him, for my brother, it was hard. It was real hard. But things is getting better now. This is something that happened. It was his time to go, and you've just got to go on.

MB: Yes. Well, I'm sure it means a lot to have the whole community –

SN: Oh, yes.

MB: – together.

SN: Yes. The community really pulled – I mean, they pulled together for us and for the (Green?) family, just like they always do. If anything goes wrong with the community, with a family, it seems like the whole community pulls together as one big family.

MB: Yes. I remember interviewing – was it Faye and Leroy Dixon who make the crab pots over here, [inaudible] crab pots?

SN: [affirmative]

MB: This was last summer, and they were some of the first people I interviewed. They were talking about that, about that sense of community and especially for the maybe who are the more – not true but – or I'm sure plenty of people, but moving into Sneads Ferry [inaudible] the marine base or whatever who are not really part of this place or people even retiring here, making them come in from New York or wherever – but the true community of Sneads Ferry, the families like yours that go way back, those are people who will stick together in something like this.

SN: Oh, yes. It was all locals that grew up here that sticks together on a crisis here, just people who grew up here, just lived here all their life and stuff, which we've got a lot of people moving into Sneads Ferry that don't know a lot of people. But I'm pretty sure that if they knew and knew how the community works and stuff, they would join in too. But it was mostly just the local people. Ed Brown, with the Onslow County Sheriff's Department, they've really done a fantastic job on heading up the search and everything. So, we got to give the Onslow County Sheriff's Department and Ed Brown most of the credit. Because they've really done a wonderful job on everything.

MB: Yes. I met him, talked to him at that church, a month ago. We're going to interview him a little bit. He's agreed to do that. He talked about that. Well, is there anything else you want to add to this, Scott? I mean, it's been very good, appreciate you sharing this stuff with us. I'm sure it's not easy to talk about, of course, when it's somebody like your brother. It doesn't get any closer than that. Anything else that comes to mind? I mean, I hope the fishermen can continue.

SN: We hope too, because, like I said, I love doing it. I mean, all of the boys around here love doing it because we don't want no boss. We can pretty much come and go as we please on the work part of it. But also, like you said, if we don't work, we don't pay our bills. We don't put food on the table, which I've – knock on wood, I've not had that problem yet, we not being able to pay the bills or putting food on the table. Because I'm a hard worker like the rest of the boys around here are. But I know in other fishing villages and stuff up and down the coast and everything, there's a lot of people that – they can't work or that has problems with working and stuff, that has hard time paying their bills and putting food on the table and everything.

MB: Plus, you got salt money away for the wintertime when the fishing is not that good, right?

SN: Oh, yes. It's tough to do that too, [laughter] which most of time, I've got a little bit stashed back for the winter to get me through on times that are hard like the loss of my brother. That was

a couple of weeks there that I couldn't – I didn't go to work. It isn't because I couldn't work because I could have, but I just lost my brother. There was no way I was going to go to work. A lot of the other boys in the community here, laid out of work, 3, 4, 5 days until we found him. I don't believe that there was but one or two boys that worked during the days of looking for him. But I mean, they were looking too while they were working. Because they were working up there in the areas – around the area where he was lost at. But community real stuck together on the search for him.

MB: Well, okay. Good. Thanks, Scott.

SN: I appreciate it.

MB: My pleasure. Thank you.

[end of transcript]